



TOUR OF BEAUTY

Artists and artisans alike have long found sustenance in the food, wine and beauty of Chianti. Pat Nourse travels through Italy's most famous, and picturesque, region to meet its legendary producers and pay his respects to the mighty bistecca Fiorentina.

This is Tuscany. The domes and bridges of Florence, the Palio of Siena, the towers of San Gimignano, landmarks all, seem diminished in their evocative powers when compared to the gentle roll of hills patterned with vine and stippled with evergreens. Say "Italian countryside" to the average Australian on the street and a perfect paint-by-numbers facsimile of the slopes around Greve, Radda and Castellina pops into their heads. replete with rustic farmhouses, olive groves and gentlemen farmers, even if they've never heard of Chianti or drunk a drop of sangiovese in their lives. The picture isn't just three-dimensional, but synaesthetic too, fusing bright sun with the scents of laurel and juniper. of wild fennel and stubborn rosemary. This rich earth is Tuscany's flesh, its inky wines its blood, the nourishment of Dante, da Vinci and Puccini. The bricks and tiles of the great cities of Florence and Siena were quarried and kilned here, and to this day artists and artisans alike find sanctuary in these hills - whether they deal in marble and oils or grain and grapes.

The grapes, famously are taking over, along with the olives. As the value of Chianti's wine and oil rises ever higher, more of the land comes under vine, though some fields of wheat remain, as do pockets of less usual crops. Crocuses grown for saffron and fields of irises prized by perfumers give bursts of colour against the dominant dun and green.

And then there's meat. Though Italy is known as a nation of market gardeners, and Tuscans are nicknamed "mangiafagioli" (bean-eaters) by other Italians. the people of Chianti are serious about their meat. Maybe it's a sign of their relative affluence or perhaps it's just the long association with the Chianina, the massive white cattle that are the pride of Italy's beef-eaters.

The Chianina were a very Italian choice of beast of burden, being as well-regarded for their strength as their eating quality and it was their meat that became the steak of Florence, the bistecca Fiorentina. Yet with the advent of mechanisation and the encroachment of the grape, these ancient, marmoreal giants, the tallest cattle still extant, became a rarity in their own backyard,

In fact, on a side street in the hamlet of Panzano in Chianti, in the heart of the Chianti Classico denomination, a plaque mourns the bistecca Fiorentina in mock-heroic (or perhaps not so mock) style: "Reduced to inactivity but preferring death". The marble is decorated with a relief of a steak and dated 31 March 2001. It commemorates the "premature disappearance" of the famed dish on that day not, it turns out. because of the scarcity of Chianina, but because of a mad-cow-ridden EU edict against serving meat on the bone (which was lifted in 2006).

The plaque, which was erected following a mock funeral procession, says a lot about the man whose butchery it adorns. Much has been written about Antica Macelleria Cecchini. the pulpit, atelier and theatre of Dario Cecchini, Chianti's poet-butcher; most notably in Bill Buford's 2006 book, *Heat*. Still, in life Cecchini looms larger, and possibly more Mephistophelean, than you expect, and the magic of his shop is undimmed by anticipation. The small room is crammed with trophies and trinkets, books and bottles. A statue of a noticeably well-hung, bull-headed satyr stands beside shelves of condiments and books - Fergus Henderson's *Nose to Tail Eating* is among the English titles as are, less expectedly a few Jamie Oliver books. In the display case, there's not a bit of Astroturf to be seen, the neatly tied pieces of meat and crocks of charcuterie wreathed in branches of hay and lemon. Unless you have the time and the villa to do some cooking much of the shop's wares will be of purely academic interest, but you can pick up jars of Profumo del Chianti, a fine Sicilian sea salt herbed with sage, fennel pollen, lavender, juniper thyme, bay and rosemary ("breathe in deeply", the label reads, "for sudden attacks

ANTICA MACELLERIA FALORNI

of nostalgia"), or the spicy Mostarda Mediterranea relish. And, as seems to be the way in these parts, the macelleria is also somewhere you can grab a drink and a snack. Drop by in the late afternoon and there'll be a fiasco of red wine on the go and something meaty to eat.

If you require more substantial sustenance, you're in luck. During the past few years, Cecchini has spun his meat expertise into three eateries: Solociccìa, a trattoria serving a fixed price menu of mostly came delights; the Officina della Bistecca, a convivial way of answering the difficult question of the perfect way of cooking Her Majesty the bistecca alla Fiorentina, and Her sisters, the costata and the Panzanese steak"; and Mac Dario, Cecchini's answer to fast food. The last, the simplest of the establishments, serves a mammoth patty of crumbed Tuscan beef sans bun, with potatoes roasted with sage and rosemary in place of chips. The Officina is self-explanatory though it's worth highlighting the menu note on the meat itself "The beef we serve undergoes my personal selection process and is of Spanish origin". Though the Chianina is on its way back, being now raised purely for its meat, supplies are too small and expensive to fit me \$73-for-the-lot bill here. The other mild shock is how far from rustic the setting is - you can reach the dining room through a James Bond-esque sliding panel at the back of the butchery and though the communal table overlooking the open kitchen is convivial, it's very contemporary.

It's the same story at Solociccìa, the first and best-known of Cecchini's ventures into the restaurant world. The look is polished, miles away from the bucolic Tuscan clichés, and yet there's an earthiness and a friendliness here that's deeply appealing. It's also hard to fault the value: for your \$44, you get a series of dishes largely themed around meat and served at tables for 10, so there's a good chance you'll make a few friends as plates of raw vegetables are passed round with olive oil, bread is torn and wine poured. There are bowls of chickpeas and white beans and some crisply battered vegetables, but it's the meat that really wows, whether in the deep, spicy darkness of "crostini nero", Tuscany's offal-rich answer to mince on toast, or the serious beefiness of "ramerino in culo", a dish of rare meatballs skewered on rosemary, whose name is probably best left untranslated. Cecchini's sense of whimsy, the arch of his eyebrows, comes to the fore, too, in other signatures - me sushi del Chianti, a local take on beef tartare, the tonno del Chianti, pork thigh cooked in white wine and men shredded to (vaguely) resemble tuna, and the artery-hardeningly delicious burro del Chianti, a "butter" of pork lard whipped with vinegar, garlic, rosemary and salt. Unusually for Italy you can BYO at each of these places.

Chianti's second-most famous butchery is less radical but not lacking in spectacle. Down in Greve, Antica Macelleria Falorni has been open since 1729, so it really puts the antica in macelleria. If the Chianina is Cecchini's muse, then the "cinta senese", the local black pig, is Stefano Falorni's inspiration. Each butchery trades in both animals - there are some old photographs of Chianina among the frames on Falorni's walls- but this is where gourmands from Florence and beyond flock for their salumi needs, whether it's cured sausages flavoured with local wines or with wild fennel seeds. "The Chianti region offers an abundance of rare herbs: fennel, juniper, laurel, garlic, parsley sage, rosemary at their freshest", says Falorni. "Such a range allows us to create typical salame, with a harmonious perfume and flavor".

Get talking to Falorni and he'll probably show you around the cave underneath the shop where row upon row of pecorino cheeses are maturing or point out the jar full of tusk that stands as a two-foot-tall testament to the shop's reputation for outstanding wild boar. And then there's the prosciutto, hanging from the rafters like well-fed bats. San Daniele and Parma may have the names, but the denominations are defied here with pink slices of ham that fall across the palate in velvet ribbons.

Falorni, it turns out, is good mates with the boys at Joselito, one of Spain's most celebrated jamón producers, and it seems that more than a few legs have traded hands over the years.



Though tasting opportunities are sparser here, Falorni has possibly Tuscany's best postcards - vintage prints featuring cherubic pigs at play.

With your palate warmed up, it's time to cross the piazza and hit some vino at Le Cantine. Wine is, of course a serious subject in Chianti and if you want to taste all the big names under one roof this is the place. It stocks everything from super-Tuscans to bottlings from the bloke up me road, and though the winemaking tools decorating the place are ancient, they've also got one of those newfangled Enomatic preservation systems, so self-guided tastings are a breeze. You buy a card loaded with credit, poke it into a machine and out comes a taster of any one of dozens of different wines-Chianti Classico, Brunello di Montalcino, you name it.

Palate fired, wine tasted, it's time to eat. Ask a local where to find a real bistecca Fiorentina and you'll get a consistent answer: Da Padellina. This local icon in Strada has a hunting-lodge feel, heavy on the taxidermy, that appears to attract an unusually large number of German tourists. Or maybe they're just here for the steak. You may have heard that a proper bistecca Fiorentina is big. What you might not know, though, is that these mighty T-bones are cut so incredibly thick, they're nearly as deep as they are wide. The finished product arrives after some serious cooking on all its faces, still several inches high, and even in this land of big blokes, few people kid themselves about tackling one solo. It's a completely different beast to the marbled monsters on Australian menus, a brick of grass-sweet meat, made smoky rather than charry by careful handling on the grill. But out a Chianti Classico – what else? - a sangiovese - rich Renzo Marinai, say, and roll up your sleeves. Though the steak is a specialty, you'll also want to try the other signature here. The "gallo nero", or black cockerel, is the trademark of the Consorzio Vino Chianti Classico, and never has a mascot been cooked so well as with the ragù of rooster - liver, comb, innards and all - tossed through exceptional spaghetti.

Deep, dark and meaty flavours seem to answer some call buried in the Tuscan soul. One of Chianti's other most renowned dishes, and one of the simplest, is "peposo". According to Cecchini, "The story goes that maestro Filippo Brunelleschi, completely absorbed by building the wonderful dome of Santa Maria del Fiore [Florence's cathedral], thought up a diet to give his craftsmen and labourers the energy needed to carry out their supreme task with vigour and passion. "Cecchini says it's unclear whether Brunelleschi really gave the recipe to his men or vice versa, but what's clear to anyone trying it is that It's a great dish, and the sum is far greater than its humble parts of beef garlic, salt, red wine and pepper - lots of black pepper - cooked to buggery in a hot oven.

Mangiando Mangiando, a friendly osteria on the piazza in Greve, is the place to try it served with a little cake of white beans. Or you could opt for the "garganelli alla cinta senese", curls of pasta sauced with a tomato-less braise of wild boar flecked with fresh rosemary. Most main courses clock in well under the \$30-mark, defying Tuscany's rip - off reputation.

One of only eight artisan pasta-makers in Italy today, Giovanni Fabbri has pasta entwined in his DNA. His family roots here stretch back generations. The family "pastificio", or pasta factory has stood on the square at Strada since 1893. Back then, the wheat fields hemmed the town; today it's harder to find, but Fabbri says the quality of the organic Tuscan wheat he buys (at no small cost) is one of the keys to making truly great pasta.

"The art of handmade pasta is an integral part of Italian culture, but with the passing of the years, the pasta product has become more industrialised and has lost that particular quality, which you can only find when you produce it at very low temperatures and dry it over a very long period of time" he explains.

You've probably read that the Teflon coated dyes, which factory operations push their pasta through, don't make for great product, but seeing the chunky bronze dyes used here - some of them more than a century old - really drives the point home. Fabbri is adamant that after the quality of the raw materials, the key reason artisan made pasta is superior to its industrially produced equivalent is drying time.



Where the factories blast their pasta with heat to dry it in 10 hours, at the Fabbri pastificio it's done over the course of two or even five days, and it's this step that results in pasta with a richer flavour and fuller texture, and which holds me sauce much better.

Some observers claim Italy is in danger of becoming a museum, a victim of its own adherence to tradition. Chianti, though, provides examples of customs which enrich and enliven not only the region but the whole country and, yes, perhaps the world beyond with their grace and good sense. There's nothing musty or elegiac about the way of life here in the place where *La Divina Commedia* retains as much vigour as the vines, where art and agriculture, intellect and passion are one, where the landscape itself is as powerful a symbol as the buildings on it. This is Tuscany - this is Chianti.

Photography Julian Kingma